

COUNCIL 11th FEBRUARY 2010
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*PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT	AGENDA ITEM No.

HITCHIN TOWN HALL/MUSEUM: COMMUNITY GROUP PROPOSAL

REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER SERVICES
PORTFOLIO HOLDER: COUNCILLOR TRICIA COWLEY

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report provides an initial assessment of a proposal developed with community organisations for the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall to a Museum and community facility as an alternative to the scheme considered by Council on 3rd December 2009.
- 1.2 The reports provides brief technical appraisal of the proposal and a comparison with the proposal developed by NHDC during 2009 and requests Member's provide direction on the next steps.

2. FORWARD PLAN

- 2.1 The report contains a recommendation on a key decision which was notified in the Forward Plan in May 2008.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 There has been extensive work relating to the future of the North Hertfordshire Museums service and the future of Hitchin Town Hall (HTH) over an extended period starting initially in 2005.
- 3.2 The Museums Fundamental Service Review (FSR) agreed at the meeting of Cabinet on 23rd August 2005 recommended that a new museum for the district, located in a town centre, be established. It was not prescriptive as to where it should be and what it should include as significant investment would be involved although substantial revenue savings were predicted. The lack of compliance with Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), poor display storage facilities and public toilet provision and limited ability to cater for school parties in the existing Museum buildings were seen as key limitations on the service, to be rectified when the new museum was established.
- 3.3 The savings envisaged bringing the Council's expenditure on this service more in line with authorities of similar size to be sustainable. The target was set at £125,000 reduction in the annual service budget in the medium to long term and would be achieved through efficiencies in building operating costs and removal of duplication of staffing (i.e. two museums sites moving to one). To date £24,130 has been delivered as a result of operational efficiencies.

- 3.4 The recommendation to move from two Museums to one was partly driven by the need to invest large sums of money into both the existing museums buildings to make them fit for purpose. This investment was considered uneconomical, and discounted by the FSR team.
- 3.5 The Service & Financial Planning process (2005/06) approved the saving of the running costs of the Council managing Hitchin Town Hall, as £58,000 in 2007/08 and thereafter. However as a decision on an application for external funding as part of a joint working proposal with Hitchin Initiative to manage the Town Hall was not being made until 31st March 2008, provision was made to continue the revenue support for the Town Hall for the full financial year 2008/09. The net working budget for covering the direct costs of operating Hitchin Town Hall in 2009/2010 has since increased to £76,460 per annum, and remains with NHDC.
- 3.6 A Project Board was established to develop a business case for the capital projects identified within the Museum improvement plan so initially worked on developing a business case for a new collections centre as a pre-cursor to consolidating two museums in to one.
- 3.7 However, at its meeting on 27th January 2009, Cabinet considered a report of the Heads of Community Development & Cultural Services and Financial Services which provided information on a proposal to change the timescale for the closure of a museum, envisaged by the Museums FSR, in order to provide additional potential efficiencies to help produce a balanced budget for 2009/10. This report also outlined the work undertaken to look at possible alternative sites and how Hitchin Town Hall site was identified as the preferred option for more detailed study.

At that meeting Cabinet resolved:

- (1) *'That Option 2, as outlined in the report, be adopted and the necessary changes in the implementation plan be made;*
- (2) *That, as part of this strategy, plans for closing Letchworth Museum by 31 March 2011 be agreed;*
- (3) *That this be accompanied by a change in the Capital Programme to accommodate the Museum Service, including the construction of a museum in a refurbished Hitchin Town Hall;*
- (4) *That, in view of the short time available in considering this matter, the Scrutiny Committee be offered the opportunity to scrutinise this decision prior to implementation'.*

Option 2, proposed the development of Hitchin Town Hall as a museum for North Herts and the deferral of the completion of a smaller collection centre than originally envisaged in the Service Improvement Plan. The proposal envisaged the main hall being converted in to a museum and the gymnasium being retained as a community venue.

- 3.8 Following Cabinet's decision, an initial feasibility study was commissioned from Cragg Management Services to establish 'proof of concept' and this paper was subsequently

prepared for submission to the Council's Asset Management Group as a necessary stage in securing approval for capital expenditure and to help frame the terms of reference for a comprehensive feasibility study.

3.9 In considering the 'proof of concept' study Scrutiny Committee at its meeting of 18th May recommended to Cabinet:

- (1) That the Scrutiny Committee recognises the need to improve the Museums Service;*
- (2) That the Scrutiny Committee expresses concern at the lack of consultation;*
- (3) That the Museum Collection Service be separated from the public Museum Service and progressed separately;*
- (4) That future provision for current users of Hitchin Town Hall be addressed;*
- (5) That all external grant funding opportunities be pursued;*
- (6) That the need to address the problems of Museums, Hitchin Town Hall and a Museums Collections Service is acknowledged and further feasibility work is undertaken on all of these;*
- (7) That dialogue with all relevant bodies regarding museums is continued.*

3.10 Following this Cabinet at its meeting of the 19th May resolved:

- (1) That a full feasibility study be commissioned in order to ascertain the suitability or otherwise of the future use of Hitchin Town Hall as a North Hertfordshire Museum;*
- (2) That the recommendations and views of the Scrutiny Committee and the public speakers at the meeting be taken into account as part of the work on the feasibility study.*

3.11 On 20th October Cabinet considered the completed feasibility study and in doing so resolved:

- (1) That the findings set out in the report and Feasibility Study for conversion of Hitchin Town Hall into a new Museum be supported;*
- (2) That the comments, views and recommendations of the public speakers, the Hitchin Committee, the Letchworth Committee and the Scrutiny Committee be noted.*

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL:

- (1) That the necessary financial and other resources necessary to progress the conversion of Hitchin Town Hall into a new Museum be put in place;*
- (2) That, subject to this, the financial impact of delaying the closure of Letchworth Museum to coincide with the plans to open the new museum be quantified.*

3.12 Subsequently, at its meeting on 3rd December 2009, Council resolved to:

- (1) *That the findings set out in the Feasibility Study (Annexes 1 to 3) and the report be noted;*
- (2) *That the recommendation from Cabinet at its meeting held on 20 October 2009, as set out in the report, be noted;*
- (3) *That, before considering whether or not to progress this project, the whole matter be deferred to the next meeting of Council on 4 February 2010,* to allow proposals from community groups who have previously expressed interest to be submitted, examined and reported on;*
- (4) *That the closure of Letchworth Museum be delayed to coincide with the plans to open the new museum.*

[*Subsequently deferred to a special meeting of Council on 11th February 2010]

3.13 This report provides an initial assessment of the proposal developed with the community groups to 'proof of concept' stage, provides a brief technical appraisal of the proposal in comparison to the original proposal considered in December 2009 and requests that Members provide direction on the next steps.

4. HITCHIN TOWN HALL/MUSEUM: COMMUNITY GROUP PROPOSAL

4.1 Following Council's decision on 3rd December 2009 detailed work has been carried out to develop the outline proposal put forward by a number of community organisations (the 'Community Group') to a stage where reasonable assurance could be provided to Members that the scheme met their policy objectives in terms of service provision and cost. This has entailed commissioning the Council's existing specialist architect to produce detailed plans and costings for both an initial and then second substantially revised alternative proposal in a more detailed form that could provide 'proof of concept' as a pre cursor to potentially undertaking a full feasibility study. This is a requirement of the Council's Capital Management Strategy.

4.2 In order to assess the feasibility, and in agreement with the Community Group, a number of general assumptions have been made:

- That the building would continue to operate as a single entity in most respects underpinned by a management agreement between the Town Hall Gymnasium Trust, Community Group and NHDC which would be responsible for the overall management of the site.
- That the Community Group (or its successor) would lead on developing the programming, marketing and operation of the community facility.
- That NHDC's estimated operating budgets and assumptions would apply to the Community Group proposal other than for income projections
- That the Community Group would develop a corporate vehicle to manage its elements of the enterprise, perhaps through a new community interest company based on the existing corporate structure of the Hitchin Initiative.

- 4.3 The Community Group is currently an informal alliance of a number of community organisations in Hitchin whose broad views are represented by Directors of Hitchin Initiative. The Community Group comprises:
- **Hitchin Forum Group members:** Bancroft Townswomen's Guild, Benslow Music Trust, British Schools Museum, Friends of Butts Close, Herts Medical & Pharmaceutical Trust, Hitchin Allotments Association, Hitchin Friends Meeting, [Historical Society], Lawn Tennis Club, Oxfam, Hitchin Market Traders, Priory End Residents' Association, the Parish of Hitchin, Trevor Road Residents' Association, Triangle Residents' Association, Walsworth Evening TG, West Mill Community Association, Whitehill Ladies' Group and individuals.
 - **Hitchin Initiative Community members:** Hitchin Youth Trust, Hitchin & District Scouts, The Caldicott Centre, Hitchin Rugby Club, Black Squirrel Credit Union, Hitchin Town Community Football Club, Rhythms of the World as well as Hitchin Forum, Hitchin Society and Hitchin Historical Society.
 - **Hitchin Chamber of Commerce & Industry**
- 4.4 A statement setting out the Group's joint vision for the Town Hall as a museum and community facility is attached as Annex A. In brief this seeks to retain the Mountford Hall as a community venue and develop the gymnasium and an adjacent shop for the Museum. The Group would take responsibility for raising the additional c.£800k required to do this through a grant/loan arrangements, repaying the loan from increasing hire, catering and other income.
- 4.5 Representatives of the Group have indicated that, should the project proceed, it will be necessary to establish a legal entity such as a Community Interest Company to act on their behalf and to be responsible for discharging their obligations. This may be achieved through changes to the company structure of Hitchin Initiative.
- 4.6 In order to provide Members with sufficient information to decide on a way forward this report provides a comparison of the scheme considered by Council on 9th December and the scheme now proposed by the Community Group. This is detailed in the report of the Council's specialist architectural advisors Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams and is attached as Annex B. It should be noted, however, that because the new scheme has only been developed to 'proof of concept' stage an accurate comparison would only be possible if this was further developed by way of a full feasibility study as would the authorisation of any capital expenditure by NHDC on the scheme.
- 4.7 The estimated capital and revenue implications of the Community Group's proposals are detailed in paragraph 6 and are based on the assumptions detailed in paragraph 4.2. Members will note that the principal differences between the schemes are that:
- Significantly increased capital expenditure will be required for the Community Group proposal to purchase and demolish the shop to the east of the Town Hall in Brand Street. The cost of acquisition has been estimated by the Community Group And, added to the cost of the construction of additional museum accommodation on the cleared site together with other miscellaneous expenditure, would give a total estimated additional capital spend of £800,000 which would be borne by the Group.

- In revenue income/expenditure terms most costs are broadly comparable between the two schemes with the exception of the significantly increased income required in the community group scheme to enable repayment of the anticipated loan.
- 4.8 Members are asked to note that the recent application for the listing of the Town Hall to the Secretary of State may have an impact on both proposals although it is considered likely that the general approach suggested in both would still be feasible. Should the building be listed, proceeding with either proposal will require consent from the Secretary of State. At the time of writing this report confirmation of whether this application has been approved is yet to be received.
- 4.9 The Community Group proposal would require approval for the demolition of a shop in Brand Street and this too would require consent of the Secretary of State. Additionally, the detailed design of any extension to the Town Hall here would need to be carefully considered in relation to the adjacent building and Brand Street more generally.
- 4.10 The Community Group and their advisors have indicated that the capital required would be sought via an application to the 'Community Builders' Fund. This is a national programme which, for schemes of this nature, may be able to grant aid 40% of costs of this nature and make provision for a long term loan for the 60% remaining.
- 4.11 At this stage no formal consultation has taken place with the Cabinet Sub Committee Hitchin Town Hall Trust Gymnasium Trust Administrators although in developing the proposals the Community Groups and Officers have been guided by the need to allow the Trust to discharge its responsibilities. There are a number of ways in which this could be arranged for example, it is feasible that the Trust's objectives could be met through the provision by NHDC of a museum in the Workman's Hall and Gymnasium. However, beyond providing an indication that it should be possible to make arrangements which will allow the Trust to discharge its responsibilities, further detailed examination of this would need to be undertaken as part of a full feasibility study should this be agreed. The Cabinet Sub Committee (Hitchin Town Hall Trust) acting as Administrators for the Trust must then be content that the interests of the Trust are served by the proposal.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Cabinet has responsibility for agreeing policies and strategies other than those reserved to Council. Strategic decisions relating to Museums and Halls are not reserved to Council but in this case because of the potential capital expenditure involved, and in accordance with previous decisions, this matter is now presented to Council.
- 5.2 Under the terms of the conveyance (which passed the Gymnasium within the Hitchin Town Hall to the former Hitchin UDC) any future use of the Gymnasium must be for use as a Gym *or for other purposes mentioned in s6(3) Museums and Gymnasiums Act 1891* and also for any other (charitable) purpose for the benefit of the North Herts District. The Museums and Gymnasiums Act 1891 has been replaced by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 and the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976. Broadly, there are powers in these two Acts for local authorities to provide recreational facilities, Museums and Art Galleries. The Trust relating to part of Hitchin Town Hall is therefore likely to be able to support the use of its property as a Museum and Community Hall/Gym.

- 5.3 The future of any property subject to the Trust outlined in paragraph 5.2 above will be subject to the consideration by and the formal agreement of, the Cabinet Sub-Committee (Hitchin Town Hall Trust). The Council is the Trustee, however the Cabinet Sub-Committee has been constituted to act on behalf of the Council to consider all matters in connection with the future use, operation and management of the Trust property. Its role is to act exclusively in the best interests of the Trust. Clear separation of the role of the Sub-Committee to consider the Trust property and the role of Cabinet to consider the remainder of the property must be maintained. There would also be a need to obtain the agreement of the Charity Commission.
- 5.4 Should Council decide to further investigate the feasibility of the Community Group option the procurement of a contractor to undertake the works will need to comply with the Council's Contract Procurement Rules.
- 5.5 In addition detailed consideration will need to be given to a range of important issues including appropriate governance arrangements and any proposed management and lease arrangements between the Community Group, Town Hall Trust and Council. More detail around these issues would be identified and developed during any feasibility study.

6. FINANCIAL AND RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The original scheme cost in the capital programme is £3.5m (inclusive of a Resource Centre) and included within this is provision for professional fees relating to appraisal, design and tender stages. Approval for these stages is in place for 2009/10, the timetabling and total amount of this funding will need to be reviewed in line with the outcome of a feasibility study, if Council approval to progress is given.
- 6.2 Should Council decide it wishes to explore the Community Group proposal in further detail funding of up to £20,000 will be required to conduct a feasibility study. The costs of the feasibility study can only be capitalised if the capital scheme proceeds. Should the scheme not proceed, revenue funding will need to be identified to cover the costs. The costs of feasibility work carried out, including £8,000 for developing the Community Group proposal, to date total c.£40,000.
- 6.3 Estimates for the original proposal considered by Council in December (referred to in Annex B as 'Gymnasium Retained') scheme confirmed that the proposal for conversion to Hitchin Town Hall to provide a Museum and community facility is £3.44 m. The Community Group proposal (referred to as 'Hall Retained') is expected to cost £4.23 m including the acquisition of the shop site and associated costs. The Community Group has proposed that they would apply for a £790K difference between the two schemes as a grant from the 'Community Builders Fund' which if successful would be provided 40% as grant and 60% as a long term loan. The Group envisages that additional income generated through increased usage at the town hall would be sufficient to make repayment on this.
- 6.4 The significant capital resources required for this project will require a review of the availability of funding from capital receipts and whether it would be desirable for the Council to fund the project through prudential borrowing. Given the timescales involved only the fit out element of this work can realistically form part of an external funding bid by the Council which is indicated as a maximum of £1.03m.

- 6.5 An additional sum of up to £1m may also be needed if plans in the Museum FSR are pursued to re-provide a new Collection Centre. Detailed work will be conducted to re-specify and cost the requirements of this linked scheme if a Hitchin Town Hall Museum project progresses. Because of the reduced requirement in staffing accommodation and storage requirements for both schemes, and in accordance with Cabinet's direction, it is likely that the scale of the proposed collection centre would be significantly reduced.
- 6.6 Financial modelling suggests that significant annual revenue savings of c.£160k per annum could be achieved by implementing either project.

Table 1: Hitchin Town Hall Museum & Community Venue proposal annual revenue estimates:

Site	Current Revenue Expenditure (including overheads)	Projected Net Expenditure at Hitchin Town Hall if either proposed scheme is progressed
Hitchin Museum	£ 192,280	£ -
Letchworth Museum	£ 224,170	£ -
Other Museum Management costs	£ 196,490	£ 196,490
Hitchin Town Hall	£ 189,440	£ 444,940
Grand Total	£ 802,380	£ 641,430

- 6.7 The Museums FSR suggested a £125,000 savings target in the annual revenue cost of the service in the medium to long term. Both current proposals envisage savings of c.£160,000 to be achieved. In addition with significant community usage being able to be retained at the Hitchin Town Hall site it is expected that many regular hirers could continue to be accommodated, and income from this and savings from having Museums staff on site to administer and operate the building for community use gives a further cost saving.
- 6.8 Table 2 sets out a summary of the estimated efficiencies below. The Community Group proposal only differs in income projection i.e this should be a positive figure and should include additional cost of loan repayment although this is yet to be fully quantified.

Table 2: Hitchin Town Hall Museum Proposal: Estimated Revenue Efficiencies

Efficiencies	£,000
Museums Efficiencies	
Staffing	£62,330 *
Buildings	£62,730

Town Hall	
Staffing	£68,000
loss of income	(£32,110)
Total	£160,950

* Included £24,130 savings already achieved; £38,200 to be identified.

- 6.9 Hitchin Town Hall has been identified as needing significant investment to modernise and refurbish costed in the region of £930,000 when last reviewed in 2007, however no funding to do this has been identified.
- 6.10 If either of these proposals are agreed, both Letchworth Museums and Hitchin Museum buildings would be declared surplus to requirements. Covenants exist on both buildings which will restrict opportunities for their reuse. However their closure as public venues will significantly reduce the future investment requirements relating to improved access.
- 6.11 Whilst both proposals contain technical risk associated with building works there is a greater risk associated with the Community Group's proposal in that; it is dependant on a successful grant aid/loan application and the Group's ability to repay this, involves more complex legal agreements and would extend the timescale of the project, although this is difficult to quantify at this stage. The Community group's income projections in particular would require detailed development and examination as part of any further feasibility study.

7. HUMAN RESOURCE AND EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 Currently there are no immediate Human Resources implications arising from this planning stage. If these proposals are progressed, detailed discussions relating to the impact of these plans on staff will be required to take place at the earliest opportunity.
- 7.2 The Council recognises the changing nature of equality legislation and incorporates national legislation and regulations into its scheme and services as appropriate, as set out in the Corporate Equality Strategy. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 marked a very significant innovation in the legal framework. It placed much of what was previously only advisory and voluntary on to a statutory footing. The Act extends the provisions of the Race Relations Act 1976 to cover all the activities of all public authorities. It makes important extensions to public authority duties. Equivalent statutory duties have been created for disability by the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 and for gender by the Equality Act 2006. These duties divide into a general duty and specific duties.
- 7.3 The Museum FSR Service Improvement Plan was specifically designed to improve accessibility to Museum facilities and in particular to achieve compliance with the provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act. Upper floors of Hitchin and Letchworth Museums and Hitchin Town Hall are all inaccessible to those unable to negotiate stairs, whether due to a disability or other reasons.

8. CONSULTATION WITH EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS AND WARD MEMBERS

- 8.1 The proposal considered by Council on 3rd December 2009 was the subject of extensive consultation with the Facilities Working Group, Area Committees, Scrutiny Committee, Hertfordshire County Council Library Service and relevant Portfolio Holders.
- 8.2 The Community Group proposal has been subject to more limited consultation because of the need to conclude the initial 'proof of concept' study for this meeting. However, the Community Group itself has consulted with and secured the consensus of the majority of community organisations detailed in paragraph 4.3.
- 8.3 No further consultation has been undertaken with nearby residents who outlined problems they have experienced when the main hall had been evening use of social gatherings and these concerns would need to be addressed should either scheme proceed.
- 8.4 Similarly, no further consultation has been undertaken with those who objected the loss of existing museums or to the reduced capacity to accommodate very large events which both schemes entail, albeit to a differing extent/ it is recognised that some of the former 'objectors' may now be proponent of the Community Group scheme.

9. CONCLUSIONS

- 9.1 As stated in the report, direct comparison between both schemes is not fully possible unless the Community Group proposal is worked up in greater detail and a full feasibility study undertaken. The broad conclusion of this report is however, that at their different stages of developments both schemes appear capable of meeting the Council's policy and financial objectives.
- 9.2 If Members wish to proceed with the Community Group option it should be recognised that this would represents an increased risk in terms of the delivery of the project in terms of cost, time and long term sustainability although the detailed Feasibility would attempt to quantify and mitigate these.
- 9.3 Equally, other options are available. Members may wish to proceed with the scheme originally proposed in December 2009 and although this carries a lower level of risk this would be borne entirely by NHDC. Alternatively, Members may wish to instruct officers to report on other alternatives or a fundamental change in the approach and report these at a future meeting.

10. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To ensure Members receive and understand the professional advice about the suitability of Hitchin Town Hall to be a new Museum, whilst also being able to continue to provide community use facilities in Hitchin town centre.
- 10.2 In order that this project can be progressed, in line with agreed policy, the appropriate resources need to be assigned.
- 10.3 To ensure cost efficiencies can be achieved with minimal disruption to the users of the museums service and Hitchin Town Hall.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 11.1 Council is asked to consider this report and determine how it wishes to proceed.

12. REPORT AUTHOR

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13. APPENDICES

- 13.1 Annex A Community Group Vision
- 13.2 Annex B Buttress Fuller Alsop Williams – Museum Feasibility Study

14. REFERENCE

- 14.1 Hitchin Town Hall and Museum Technical Annex (Council 3rd December 2009)
http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/index/council_and_democracy/democracy/council_and_committee_meetings/reports_archive/council_archive.htm

15. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 15.1 Report to Cabinet 23rd August 2005 on the Findings of the Review of the North Herts Museums Services.
- 15.2 Draft Collections Centre Business Case submitted to the Museums Project Board, 5th March 2008.

- 15.3 Report to Cabinet 27th January 2009 on the Future of Museums Services.
- 15.4 Cragg Management Services report on the possible relocation of North Hertfordshire Museums to Hitchin Town Hall- Annex 2, Cabinet 19th May 2009
- 15.5 Hitchin Town Hall Museums Feasibility - Options Appraisal Report, 3rd September 2009
- 15.6 Report to Cabinet 20th October 2009 - Hitchin Town Hall Museum Feasibility Study Outcome
- 15.7 Report to Council 3rd December 2009- Hitchin Town Hall Museum Feasibility Study Outcome and Action Arising

HITCHIN TOWN HALL AND MUSEUM

An Enhanced Scheme proposed by Hitchin Initiative on Behalf of an Alliance of Community Organisations

Hitchin Initiative support the North Herts District Council's vision to create a much improved museum in Hitchin and believes that in addition to substantial Council revenue savings there is potentially considerable community benefit in combining the functions of the Town Hall and the Museum on the Town Hall site, whilst also extending the existing community use of the venue as part of the partnership approach between ourselves and the Council.

We believe that in order for the project to be effective and sustainable both the Town Hall and Museum functions must be enhanced under any new scheme such that:-

- (1) The historic architecture of the Mountford Hall is preserved and that this unique space is retained for community use into the long term.
- (2) The entrance to the complex compliments and enhances the use of the Town Hall providing access which is appropriate for it's use, function and significance as an important civic building in Hitchin

We believe that both of the above issues are fundamental and that the enhanced scheme we are proposing would enable much greater community involvement and for the complex to become financially viable and sustainable into the long term.

Introducing the Enhanced Scheme.

The Initiative's scheme seeks to purchase 14 ,Brand Street which following demolition and rebuilding would provide a widened, impressive access and foyer to the new combined Town Hall and Museum complex.

The Mountford Hall would remain intact for full community use and the Workmans Hall with its new raised roof provide a two storey Museum facility.

The enhanced scheme would require an application to The Community Builders Fund to bridge the funding gap between the current preferred option and the Initiative's enhanced proposal. Initial discussions have indicated that an application would be favourably received.

Our Vision

'To rejuvenate Hitchin Town Hall Complex to create a mixed use venue for all that becomes a beacon for progress, community, enterprise and creativity. A focus of civic pride and community spirit.'

The Distinctive Qualities of the Project

- Our suggested scheme provides a workable combined facility which the Town and District can be proud of.
- Retains and improves the Mountford Hall and the Lucas Room as community facilities.
- Gives the Museum the access and presence which a facility of its size and importance deserves.
- The entrance hall, exhibition space and the cafe would be used in connection with the community use of the Town Hall.
- The cafe would be commercially viable and make a substantial contribution to the loan element of the funding package secured by Hitchin Initiative.
- In the Summer, tables would be put out on the south facing pavement in front of the Museum and on the roof terrace.
- The Local Study Centre is located on the ground floor so it can be used outside Museum hours with community use under the supervision of volunteers from Hitchin Historical Society.
- The scheme provides improved security to the Museum collections when the building is being used out of hours.
- As well as the significant community use, the Mountford Hall would be available for conferences, public meetings and major local and travelling national exhibitions.

There is an agreed need to regenerate the building and the Initiative's proposal brings together public money and community funding to create a building fit for 21st Century purpose. The rich mix of uses within the enhanced flexible building will help it thrive financially with countless opportunities for multi-purpose uses within the restored facility.

We believe it is a technically proven option with retained flexibility in its current floor plan design to optimise the use of the building. It is an imaginative scheme with the two venues anticipated to be run on a complimentary basis.

The Initiative is extremely grateful for the help given by officers of NHDC and Neil Charlton of Buttress Alstop Fuller Williams in assisting our efforts to working up these proposals in a very short space of time in order to provide a "like for like" comparison to the scheme already proposed as is possible at this stage pending further feasibility works.

We are ready to take this enhanced scheme to full feasibility and would anticipate making our application to The Community Builders Fund during February in order that our application can be considered in the current financial year and within the feasibility timescale needed.

We ask for your support in taking this exciting project to the feasibility stage in line with your existing proposal and that any decision regarding Hitchin Town Hall is deferred for a period to allow the full feasibility study on this alternative proposal to be completed. This will ensure that members are properly informed of the benefits and the deliverability of the enhanced solution we propose prior to taking a final decision.